

**MANY MEN WHO FOLLOW CHILD INFLUENCERS** online seek salacious images of them, often from their parents. The boxes below represent descriptions of images that appeared in court documents or were found online.

A 12-year-old girl in a tanktop and underwear poses on all fours, arching her back.

A preteen girl in a tank top pulls down her underwear straps below her hips.

A close-up of a young girl's genitals, barely covered by a G-string bikini.

A 12-year-old girl on a bed, lying on her side. She is in the process of pulling down her underwear.

A 13-year-old girl pulls up her tank top.

A 12-year-old girl spreads her legs while

exposing the lower portion of her breasts.

lying on a bed.

A 13-year-old girl wearing a bikini, showing her rear end to the camera.

A young girl lying on her back on a bed with her legs in the air. Stuffed animals appear around her.

A 12-year-old girl on all fours crawling on a bed.

A preteen girl is wearing a long white dress shirt and no underwear; her private areas are visible.

A 13-year-old girl poses in a red silk robe,  
a white bra and red silk shorts.

A young teenage girl in a see-through bra  
pulls her bikini bottoms upward, exposing  
her pubic area.

# *The Men Who Use Instagram to Groom Child Influencers*

Photographers and other men offer to build online followings for young girls, but some are pedophiles who work with parents to sexualize them.



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**By Jennifer Valentino-DeVries and Michael H. Keller**

The reporters have spent more than a year investigating child influencers, the perils of an industry that sexualizes them and the role their parents play. This is the fifth article in a series.

Dec. 30, 2024

Everyone had an idea about how the 12-year-old girl should pose in a G-string bikini as they assembled in an Airbnb rental home in a small Louisiana town.

The photographer was new to the business of shooting child influencers, so he welcomed suggestions, he later explained in an interview.

The girl's mother, swiping through images of women from men's magazines on her phone, recommended that she stand with one leg raised provocatively on a bed, he recalled. The girl, he said, proposed imitating a scene from an erotic film she had watched — she would lie on her back with her hands grasping for the bedposts.

In the end, several shots positioned her “head on a pillow and her buttocks raised in the air,” and in one, the camera focused on her “barely covered” genitals. That was the description in court documents, written by federal authorities who charged the photographer and mother with crimes related to child sexual abuse material.

“We just provided what we knew that men wanted to purchase,” the photographer, Grant Durtschi, said by telephone from a jail outside Baton Rouge.

For the past year, The New York Times has been investigating how a drive for online fame has created a marketplace on Instagram of girl influencers who are managed by their parents — Instagram does not allow children under 13 to have their own accounts — and frequently draw an audience of men.

Some of the parents, like the Louisiana mother, develop monetary relationships with the men, selling them images of the girls. Others also offer chat sessions with them and even sell their worn leotards.

Those looking to supercharge their daughters' online presence sometimes tap into an established network of men, The Times found, many of them convicted of sex crimes or accused of pedophilia, who participate in the grooming of children under the guise of working as social media professionals.

Among them was Mr. Durtschi, who pleaded guilty in March 2023 to producing child sexual abuse imagery, sometimes legally known as child pornography, during the photo shoot with the 12-year-old. He had been arrested a year earlier in San Francisco.

The men present themselves to parents — almost always mothers — as photographers, social media experts or web technicians who can create photo-selling sites for them. Some go even further, working with mothers to produce ever more sexualized content as they cultivate inappropriate relationships of their own with the daughters.

In rare cases, people like Mr. Durtschi and the 12-year-old's mother are prosecuted. But The Times found multiple instances in which allegations of pedophilia and possible criminal conduct circulated widely in the child-influencer world or had been reported to law enforcement with no known consequences.

One popular photographer gained millions of followers across social media despite rumors of inappropriate behavior with children. Documents reviewed by The Times revealed a reason behind some of the rumors, showing that he lost custody of his two minor children in 2011 after he was accused of sexually abusing his daughter, who was 7 at the time. The Los Angeles County children's court determined the allegations were credible.

That photographer, David Hofmann, was also accused by a former girlfriend of masturbating while in bed with one of her daughters when she was not much older. The mother filed a police report against Mr. Hofmann and posted other allegations against him on Facebook. The girl, now 20, confirmed her mother's account of the incident in an interview with The Times.



Ann Harris, left, and her daughter Avaree have accused an Instagram photographer of sexual misconduct. Kholood Eid for The New York Times

Mr. Hofmann, who was not charged with a crime in either case, continues to take photos of young girls. He denied in an interview that he had ever acted inappropriately with his daughter or any other girl.

He said that his ex-wife had “coached” his daughter and that his former girlfriend was “out to get” him. He also said that the children’s court system was biased against men and that the investigation into him was “meaningless” because it did not meet criminal standards.

Another man, James Lidestri, who ran multiple websites that sold photos of scantily clad minors, bought a 17-year-old girl a sex toy and offered her money for a video of her using it, text messages between the two of them show.

When the girl sent a video she described to The Times as explicit, he responded, “Outstanding, thank you 🥰,” according to the texts.

Mr. Lidestri has not been charged with a crime, and the exchanges with the 17-year-old were not reported to the police. He issued a statement through a lawyer saying that he “categorically denies sexually abusing or exploiting anyone, let alone a minor.”

The lawyer, Peter E. Brill, said, “He entered this business because there was a demand for ethical professionals in an industry that was lacking them.”

A man in Georgia, Michael Allen Walker, promoted himself as a social media expert, promising mothers that he could bring their daughters tens of thousands of followers. The Times tracked Mr. Walker’s operation to a state prison in Georgia, where he is serving a 20-year sentence after pleading guilty to the sexual exploitation of children.

Mr. Walker ran his social media business under a pseudonym and was probably using a contraband cellphone to communicate with the mothers. He bragged on Telegram, a messaging app, about having seen images of child influencers in sexual situations; his account was still active this month when The Times reached out to prison officials for comment.

A spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Corrections said that Mr. Walker was being monitored for illegal activity and that an investigation was in progress.

The mother in Louisiana is set to go on trial next month. The Times is withholding her and other mothers' names to protect the identities of their children.

The woman's lawyer, Jarrett Ambeau, said in an interview that selling sexualized photos of children should perhaps "be made illegal." But he denied that she had directed any of the shots. He said the mother had not been aware of all of the photos taken by Mr. Durtschi, and that she was not guilty of crimes related to child sexual abuse material.

"She just didn't do it," he said.

After multiple attempts to reach Mr. Durtschi, he contacted The Times this summer and said he was ready to talk to the media for the first time. He had spent more than a year in jail — mostly in solitary confinement, choosing it for his safety, he said — and is now awaiting sentencing.

In a series of interviews, he took responsibility for his crimes but criticized social media for normalizing child exploitation by making it so easy for parents and predators to connect. Forbes reported in 2022 that Mr. Durtschi continued to use Instagram to share images of minors even after he was arrested and charged.

"Instagram is the engine," Mr. Durtschi said. "If you're going to get on Instagram, you're playing with fire."

In a statement, a spokesman for Meta, which owns Instagram, said the company had placed various protections on teen accounts to limit interactions with strangers. For underage accounts run by a parent, the parent is responsible for the "content, privacy settings and any interactions with others," said the spokesman, Ryan Daniels.



“We use technology to prevent potentially suspicious accounts from interacting with teen accounts and accounts that predominantly feature minors, as well as from finding each other,” Mr. Daniels said, “and we’re continuing to expand this technology.”

## **‘Not Spread Eagle’**

The Times viewed thousands of Instagram accounts and tracked months of conversations by professed pedophiles on Telegram. Reporters also examined thousands of pages of police reports and court records and interviewed nearly 200 people associated with the child-influencer industry, including felons and alleged victims who had never before spoken publicly.

The investigation uncovered reports of dozens of men offering services to child influencers as either a business or hobby. Almost all of them declared a sexual interest in minors or fostered relationships, both online and in person, with the children and their families.

In North Carolina, a photographer named Larry Vincent Wagner, who had run a site called Starlight Nation that offered photos of girls, is now in prison after pleading guilty in January to charges of possessing illegal images of children.

In 2022, a popular Instagram teen-modeling photographer who went by the name Christian Paprika was convicted in his native Hungary of persuading girls interested in modeling to engage in sexual relations, the court said in a statement reported by Hungarian media.

Another photographer, Christopher Alexander Reilly, pleaded guilty in Texas in 2017 to downloading videos depicting child sexual abuse. The authorities also found surreptitious videos he had taken of young girls’ clothed genital areas, according to a spokesman for the U.S. attorney’s office in San Antonio.

In many cases, The Times found, predators and complicit parents proclaiming their innocence said they had carefully navigated the legal boundaries.



Taylor Compton, who started modeling as a young teenager, said she was pressured into sending explicit imagery. Kholood Eid for The New York Times

“There’s that fine line that they make sure they emphasize,” said Taylor

Compton, the former teen model who shared her text message exchange with Mr. Lidestri. She said he and others would often assure her that “technically, because you’re not spread eagle, it’s fine.”

Steve Grocki, the top Justice Department official for child exploitation issues, said federal law did not require exposed genitals for an image of a child to be illegal. Other factors matter, like the setting and purpose of the photos, he said.

“It can be transparent clothing or clothing that is partially covering,” he said.

Mr. Durtschi cited photos taken by Mr. Lidestri as blurring the legal line for him and other photographers. “Everybody that’s out there thinks they’re being shown photos that are deemed legal,” he said, adding that legal or not, he now understands sexualized photos are harmful to children.

Time and again, parents and victims expressed exasperation to The Times that so many of these men kept operating. Ann Harris, the former girlfriend of Mr. Hofmann, the California photographer, said she went to the police in Brea, Calif., several years ago. But she got the impression her case wasn’t a priority because it didn’t involve a violent crime and she and her daughter had moved away.

A spokesman for the police in Brea did not comment on her report.

## Hooking the Parents

The men on Instagram often follow a similar playbook when building relationships with child influencers and their mothers.

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In one technique, they message mothers on Instagram, asking to buy additional photos not featured on their accounts. The requests seem like safe, easy money, said a mother in Florida, but she later learned they could disguise a sinister intent.

“They’re doing that to groom that parent, to see if they could get something more,” said the mother, who related several examples of mothers being lured.

She said the men often dropped the names of other child influencers to bolster their own credibility and make mothers jealous and competitive.

Another mother in California recalled how a man reached out to her on Instagram, saying he had once run an agency called Florida Teen Models and had a program for helping girls and their mothers sell content privately. Wary of such men, she recorded their conversation, which The Times reviewed.

The man described how he and others fostered interactions with mothers and children and endeavored to get content from them. He explained that he ran “shout-out” pages on Instagram that helped increase their audience. He sent girls bikinis, promising promotion on his pages if they posted photos in them.

At first, another mother in Florida said, she found such overtures exciting. “How cool, right?” she said. “Somebody sees that my 5-year-old is talented.” But it quickly became clear to her that the men were interested in the girls sexually.

Some of the predators try to develop personal or romantic relationships with mothers to gain access to their children.

One of them told parents that his work was inspired by the death of his own teenage daughter, but reporters, who identified the man and traced him to a town near Indianapolis, found no merit to his claim that he ever had a daughter.

The man told a mother sexualized stories about the girl, an apparent effort to get her to make her own daughter available to him.

He and other men have regularly styled themselves as protectors against other pedophiles, claiming to have special knowledge of how to navigate the dark side of the internet.

But perhaps the most potent enticement for mothers is money — from a few dollars here and there as a “donation” to tens of thousands of dollars for photos and worn clothing. The Florida Teen Models man said that one client had paid him about \$25,000 over several years.

In the case of Mr. Durtschi, the photographer in jail in Louisiana, a search warrant for some of his Google Drive accounts revealed that he had made about \$14,000 for photos over three weeks in 2021. That year, the Louisiana mother of the 12-year-old and another mother sued him, saying in part that he had sold some photos without paying them or receiving their permission. They were seeking at least \$200,000.

The mothers said in the lawsuit that Mr. Durtschi had sold some of the photos beyond their “approved and verified” buyers.

In a court filing, Mr. Durtschi said the mothers knew that “the money is all coming from older men who pay to see content of underage girls who are being as inappropriately sexy as they can get them to be. Most of the world would call these pedophiles.”

Mr. Durtschi listed more than two dozen people he said were involved in a network that produces sexualized images of child influencers. He also submitted photos of the two women’s daughters that had been taken by other photographers. The images were so sexually revealing that the judge said they could be illegal.

Mr. Durtschi, who resided in Texas, said he was drawn into the child-influencer world through a combination of his sexual attraction to children and the ease of approaching them through Instagram. In 2021, he said, he was browsing Instagram and came across an 8-year-old cheerleader who lived nearby. He reached out to the mother and proposed a photo shoot.

The first sessions consisted of innocent shots in a park, he said, but after a few weeks, he suggested they sell racier photos to make money. The mother was interested, he recalled, but insisted it be kept quiet. He reached out to pedophiles on Telegram. “It went to the guys I most trusted,” Mr. Durtschi said.

He also paid the mother for photos only for him. In one, the girl was fully nude except for glow-in-the-dark body paint, and in another, she was nude except for a “3-6 foot gummy snake,” according to court records.

The mother is now serving a 32-year sentence for her role in the scheme. Her conviction is under appeal.

Mr. Durtschi said he had “extreme regret, remorse and sorrow” about involving the girl and her mother.

Other men have expressed no such remorse, instead treating the girls like trading cards and bragging about their access to them, The Times found by monitoring Telegram channels and other communications.

The Florida Teen Models man described his many purchases of girls’ worn leotards as “the ultimate collection.” He encouraged the mother who recorded him to sell her daughter’s clothing, too. “It can be tasteful, it can be tactful, and it also serves the public.”

## **‘They Could Live in Your House’**



Three years after Mr. Hofmann and his wife separated, the well-known social media photographer began communicating on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat with a 9-year-old girl named Avaree Harris, who was attending a dance school in Arizona, she recalled in an interview.

At the time, Ms. Harris said, getting attention online from Mr. Hofmann “was very exciting.” She hoped that her friends would be impressed, and that she would draw more followers.

Later, Mr. Hofmann developed a romantic relationship with the girl’s mother, and they moved to live with him in California.

Now 20, Ms. Harris said Mr. Hofmann’s behavior sometimes made her uncomfortable. She said that he touched her leg and stomach in ways that confused her, that he insisted they sleep in the same hotel bed on a road trip and that, another time, he left a “wet spot” in the bed they were sharing.

Her recollections — which she previously shared with her mother — echoed, at least in part, the allegations filed in children’s court on behalf of Mr. Hofmann’s daughter, Maya.

In an interview, Ms. Hofmann, 21, provided additional details about the report. She said her father repeatedly came into her bed when she was 7 and did things she did not understand. She recalled once going into the bathroom and crying while telling her mother, “Dad is doing something gross.”

The children’s court sustained the allegation, documents show, after an investigation by family services in Los Angeles County — a significant result in the system, which is different from criminal court. Mr. Hofmann lost custody of his children and agreed to attend sex offender counseling, according to records of his divorce from Ms. Hofmann’s mother, but he was never charged.

“There’s a system that’s supposed to keep us safe in this country,” Ms. Hofmann said. “And that big system let me down and let him get away.”

In an interview, Mr. Hofmann described himself as a normal parent, sometimes watching movies in bed with his children, and denied both girls' accounts in their entirety. He also pointed to a medical exam, not included in the documents reviewed by The Times but cited in his divorce filings, that found no physical signs of sexual abuse involving his daughter — something she has not alleged.

He said his ex-girlfriend later learned about the allegations and, after they broke up, “tried very publicly and aggressively to ruin my reputation.”

He also cast blame on his former wife, who eventually lost custody of their children after experiencing mental health issues. For a while, the children were placed in foster care, and she moved back to her native Germany. Mr. Hofmann suggested the accusations involving his daughter were a result of his ex-wife's illness.

He shared family services documents detailing her psychological problems, including thoughts that her children were in danger of being molested by a fictitious person and her neighbors. But those documents indicated her delusions began in 2016, years after they separated and after the alleged abuse occurred. Both Maya Hofmann and her older brother, Aaron, confirmed that timeline.

At The Times's request, Aaron contacted his mother in Germany. In a text exchange, she said that she still thought her former husband was a pedophile but declined to comment further, saying she had moved on.

Multiple parents who hired Mr. Hofmann for photo shoots said that despite hearing rumors about him, they considered him kind and professional. The Times found no other abuse accusations against him. Over the weekend, his Instagram account was no longer online.

His popularity, Ms. Harris said, had made her reluctant to speak out, but she wanted people to know that predators can be disarming.



“They could have a big following,” she said. “They could live in your house.”

## **Haunted, ‘to This Day’**

Three women told The Times of alleged sexual misconduct by Mr. Lidestri, the man who ran multiple websites, going back to the 2010s, when he paid them to be teen models for his websites, which he has since shut down.

Now in their mid-20s, the women said Mr. Lidestri took advantage of their unstable family situations or need for money to persuade them to appear nude in photos. One said he sexually assaulted her.

Ms. Compton, 26, started modeling for Mr. Lidestri when she was around 14. In her first session, she said, he told her to remove her top and use her hands to cover her breasts.

In a photo from one of his sites, she appeared in a see-through bra, pulling a mesh bikini bottom in a way that revealed her pubic area. She said she was 16 at the time.

The Times asked the Canadian Center for Child Protection, which helps combat abuse material, to review that photo and several others she flagged as being taken underage. Analysts issued notices for the photos, and they have since been removed from the websites where they appeared.

Mr. Lidestri also paid Ms. Compton for explicit images and videos meant only for him, she said, and she shared text messages detailing their communications when she was 17, as well as banking records.

Over a six-week period, he asked about a dozen times for graphic videos even after she said she wanted to stop. He mailed her the sex toy and said he would pay her every month if she sent him explicit content.

“You don’t want to make a few hundred dollars?” he asked in one of the messages. “What are your alternatives?”

Ms. Compton declined, and when she later asked to be paid early for her regular modeling work because of a personal crisis, he demurred, saying he was in a “cash crunch” and couldn’t do personal favors because she had refused to sell him private images.

“Can you compromise anywhere on giving me something so I can help you?” Mr. Lidestri asked. The messages indicate that she sent him a five-minute video for \$100, which she described to the Times as showing masturbation.

Audrey Burns said she was sexually assaulted as a minor after she traveled for a photo shoot. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

Another woman, Audrey Burns, now 28, said Mr. Lidestri sexually assaulted her when she visited him in New York for a photo shoot. At the time, she said, her life was chaotic, and she had lived for a while with her mother in a shelter in Oklahoma.

She started working for Mr. Lidestri when she was 14, she recalled, and later traveled to New York with her mother. Photos she shared on Facebook from the trip included separate images of Mr. Lidestri and at least 10 \$100 bills. They were posted in April 2013, when she was 16.

Mr. Lidestri offered her money beyond what she had been paid for the photo shoot, Ms. Burns said. He then sexually assaulted her with his hands and mouth, she said. “He asked if I wanted to stop, and I couldn’t speak,” she said. “I was catatonic.”

Another woman, Amanda Zimmerman, 27, said she started modeling for Mr. Lidestri at 16. When she wanted to get a tattoo, she recalled, she needed his permission. As compensation, she said, he required a naked photo session. It “still haunts me to this day,” she said. Ms. Zimmerman said Ms. Burns was also present at the shoot, and she corroborated the woman’s account.

Amanda Zimmerman, who worked as a teen model, said she was disturbed by a naked photo shoot that was demanded of her. Kholood Eid for The New York Times

After speaking briefly with The Times, Mr. Lidestri referred questions to the lawyer, Mr. Brill, who said his client was “concerned about the motivation behind the allegations” because his business ties with at least two of the women “collapsed due to contract breaches.”

“As these allegations occurred more than a decade ago, these women may be remembering some events that happened when they were adults, but they could never have happened with Mr. Lidestri when they were underage,” Mr. Brill said. “Nevertheless, this was a business, and sometimes feelings may have gotten hurt during business negotiations.”

In particular, Mr. Brill disputed Ms. Burns's allegation of assault, saying it was "wholly and completely implausible" that her mother had left her alone and that a crime like what was alleged could have gone unreported.

All three women said they remained quiet when younger because they felt powerless, because they needed the money or because Mr. Lidestri said they or their parents could get in trouble.

But over the years, they discussed their experiences with family members or close friends. The Times spoke with Ms. Compton's partner and sister, who confirmed she had told them about her allegations long ago. Ms. Burns said she had come to grips with the events only in recent years, after hitting "rock bottom" and turning to a local church for help. Several months before The Times reached out, she confided in a close friend and her pastor about the alleged assault, the men confirmed.

As adults, the three women went into online sex work, saying the "built-in fan base" from Mr. Lidestri's sites had both pushed them and made the transition seem like the next logical step.

"I have no idea what my life would be like if I had never done this," Ms. Compton said. "But I know this is a direct cause of some of the most severe mental health issues I've ever had in my life."

*To report online child sexual abuse or find resources for those in need of help, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-843-5678.*

Adam Liptak contributed reporting. Julie Tate contributed research. Produced by Gray Beltran and Rumsey Taylor.

**Jennifer Valentino-DeVries** is an investigative reporter at The Times who often uses data analysis to explore complex subjects. More about Jennifer Valentino-DeVries

**Michael H. Keller** is a Times reporter who combines traditional reporting and computer programming. His work has examined technology's impact on society and shortcomings of the criminal justice system. More about Michael H. Keller

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